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Thyrea
AND
Other Sonnets

Thyrea

AND

Other Sonnets

BY

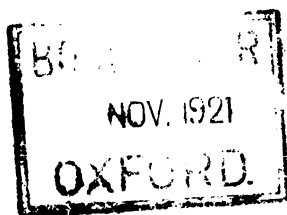
JOHN FERGUSON

EIGHTH EDITION, ENLARGED

LONDON: ANDREW MELROSE LTD.

3 YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.

1921



TO
K. C. F.

FOR permission to republish such of the following Sonnets as originally appeared in the *Daily News*, *Glasgow Herald*, *Hospital*, *Irish Monthly*, *Lancet*, *Pelican*, and the *Scotsman*, the Author is indebted to the courtesy of the Editors of those journals.



PREFACE TO EIGHTH EDITION

IT would be ingratitude not to acknowledge being deeply impressed by the favourable reception which has been given by friendly critics and a kindly public to this little book.

JOHN FERGUSON.

August 1921.

First Edition *March 1912*
Second Edition (Enlarged) . . *August 1918*
Third Edition *August 1918*
Fourth Edition *October 1918*
Fifth Edition *March 1919*
Sixth Edition *July 1919*
Seventh Edition (again Enlarged) *April 1920*
Eighth Edition (do.) August 1921

PUBLISHERS' NOTE.—All the foregoing were strictly *Editions*, although four have hitherto been erroneously described as Reprints. The author has made alterations every time the book has gone to press.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

BY W. L. COURTNEY

HERE is a booklet of sonnets which I warmly commend to the judicious reader. Five years ago a very slim volume was produced containing for the most part a sonnet-sequence written in a sanatorium, with the expressive title *Thyrea*. The little book attracted some attention and was well reviewed. It reminded some critics of Henley's Hospital poems. Supplemented by some new pieces *Thyrea* now appears in a second edition, which will, I hope, enjoy, as it deserves, an equal success.

Mr. John Ferguson has an individual note which gives distinction to his work. He con-

fines himself to the sonnet form, which he handles with considerable ease and skill, and I think he is at his best when he deals with solemn themes. Read, for instance, "L'Envoi" on p. 23, or "Chopin's Marche Funèbre" on p. 39, or "Beethoven" on p. 42, and you will recognise the dignity of Mr. Ferguson's muse and his capacity for august harmonies. But he has another aspect of his work to give us, a modern, up-to-date quality which comes out in "A Chorus-Girl," "Smith—Bank Accountant," and "A Low Comedian." In this mood he does not hesitate to write a line like "Twice nightly thus, for thirty bob a week," or "His 'biz.' and 'cackle' done he gets a 'round,'" in which he deliberately sets himself to be at all hazards realistic.

What precisely a sonnet should include and what is its essential character are of course vexed questions. In the practice of the best poets it is usually confined to the analysis of a situation, the exploration of a mood, the dissection of a personality, or the vivid rendering of a strong impression. Our author extends its scope, including, here and there,

mere narration as in "Sonnet No. III" on p. 19 and "A Chorus-Girl" on p. 30. Each reader, I hope, will find his own favourite in this charming collection of pieces, but to my mind the author has never done better than in the last six lines of the sonnet dedicated to David Gray. I can only hope that of *Thyrea* as well as of *The Luggie* it may be said—

"Fragrant thy memory, and thy star shall be
Luminous among the lesser orbs of song."

W. L. COURTNEY.

LONDON, *May* 1918.

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Thyrea

A Sonnet Sequence from a
Sanatorium

Sonnet No. I

THE everlasting sameness of the days,
 The never-ending sadness of the nights,
 The rising hope that hopelessness o'erblights,
 The fevered restlessness that slowly slays—
 How heavy is my heart! O Thou Whose ways,
 Are in the sounding deeps and starry heights,
 Illume my faith, that in Thine Arm which
 smites
 I may behold the Arm that shall upraise.

Calm and subdue this peevish spirit of mine,
 Bid me be noble for her sake, whose cry—
 “Christ on the Cross, I would not have him
 die!”
 Like evening incense rises to Thy Shrine.
 Dear God! let me be noble for her sake,
 Lest, disappointed, her brave heart should
 break.

Sonnet No. II

"LET me be noble"—God forgive the
L prayer ;
 Yet each man prays of this abandoned throng,
 And I prayed also ; but I did you wrong,
 Peculiar brothers of my own despair.
 I would retract my words with scrupulous care,
 And to the Altar bring a gift of song ;
 The pleas for pity unto you belong,
 Who hopeless scan Life's rayless thoroughfare.

A little longer in this dolesome place,
 Companioned by this death-o'ershadowed
 crew,
 Only a little longer ! Is it true
 Not mine the wasted frame, the desperate case ?
 The pleas for pity, brothers, are for you—
 And yet I prayed for pity, God of grace.

Sonnet No. III

HE caught a chill in Leicester, he came
here ;—

He came here with his little store of gold,
To this grim dwelling, bare, and clean, and
cold,

Where life joins hands with death, and hope
with fear :

He told us how in Leicester's city drear,
On coughing slightly, down his garments
rolled

The warm and scarlet flood ; and oft he told
How softly he would tread from year to year.

His wife came for him, and he left to-day

Because his little store of gold was done ;

My God ! I knew not gold and life were one
Till he shook hands with us and went away :

His limbs all fever-thinned, and hope all
gone—

O Christ in Heaven, how he longed to stay !

Sonnet No. IV

WARTIME

NOT ours by day on shell-scarred fields to
 fight,
 Nor ours o' nights the snary seas to scour ;
 Ours but to drowse from hour to languorous
 hour
 Throughout the sluggish day and slow-paced
 night ;
 Pampered and stuffed, we rest ignobly here,
 While, drenched in shrapnel spray and hail
 of steel,
 With engin'ry of death the continents reel,
 And tremble with the clang of martial gear.

 We are as men that dream ; and, soldier-wise,
 We man feigned trenches here with con-
 quering ease,
 And stand unharmed amid the shrapnel spray ;
 And when night falls, on some conceived emprise
 We board our men-o'-war and sail away,
 And with imagined searchlights sweep the
 seas.

Sonnet No. V

"ON TOUR"

S LIGHTLY deformed, he filled a sort of
gap,

Serving the chief buffoon as foil and butt,
And drollish were the capers that he cut,
And wry his features when he "took the nap" ;
He carried on, through good and evil hap,
Till Tuesday last, when, resting "on the side,"
He coughed a bit, and lo ! the arterial tide,
Crimson and warm, incarnadined his lap.

I saw him in his little room to-night,
Saw the dew'd temples and the sunken cheek,
And *knew* the shadow of death was steal-
ing on. . . .
He told me he had fixed it up all right
To join the troupe at Wigan, Monday week,
Or Monday fortnight *sure* at Warrington.

Sonnet No. VI

THERE was a shuffling of strange feet last
night

Along the naked corridor of stone ;

Dull creakings, and much talk in undertone
In the next room to mine : Death's chill and
blight

Lay on my brother, who, though screened from
sight,

Was by his ominous cough endeared and
known ;

And I, all wakeful in my chamber lone,
Quailed in the deathful dark, and longed for light.

O God, that some should stumble by the way !

They do not like us dying here, we know,

They talk about the credit of the place—

The Doctor, when he sounded me to-day,

Said never a word about last night ; and lo,

Her customary smile lights up the Nurse's
face.

L'Envoi

TO THE LORD GOD

O THOU to Whom our glorious fanes we
 rear,
 Unto Whose praise pontifical psalms are sung,
 And prayers of perfume rise from censers
 swung,
 And in Whose Presence angels tremble and
 fear :—
 I, strangely daring, crave Thy compassionate ear,
 Thy pity on these hearts by suffering wrung,
 So old in Sorrow they, and yet so young,
 My hopeless brothers lying prostrate here.

Not unto me, O Lord, but unto them
 Thy tender mercy and compassion show,
 Their destined road of dole and death
 who fare—
 Whose tremulous hands are stretched
 forth to the air,
 If haply they may touch Thy garment's hem,
 If from Thy Being virtue still may flow.

Other Sonnets

The Star Lead

THE theatre is crowded, and the air
 Heavy with perspiration, thick with
 smoke ;

The hushful stage is held by augurous
 folk,

Momentous and dread things are happening
 there :

The hired assassin leaves his hidden lair,

The hero writhes beneath the tyrant's yoke,

The unctuous villain stalks in inky cloak,

And the blanched heroine wrings her hands
 in prayer.

The heroine is saved, the villain dies,

The hired assassin meets a gory fate,

Virtue sits thronèd, and the gods rejoice :

The hero broadens his phylacteries,

Ruffling with stagey swagger in his gait,

And twenty years of touring in his
 voice.

At a Pawnbroker's Window

LOITERING along the crowded thoroughfare

I paused before a window yesternight
 Whose glittering range of gold, all gleaming
 bright,
 The sorrows of a thousand hearts laid bare ;
 The trinket and the pledge of love were there,
 The wedding ring that sealed Love's dear
 delight,
 The little cross with simple gems bedight,
 The locket that had held a mother's hair.

O, eloquent of many a tragedy,
 O, garish window in the sombre street,
 Symbol of Sorrow's victory complete,
 Telling of hapless lives in ruins that lie,
 While ceaseless throngs, unheeding, pass thee by
 Their own bright hopes pursuing with eager
 feet.

To David Gray

AUTHOR OF "THE LUGGIE"

OTHERS have poured forth loftier strains
than thine,

And Fame has placed her laurels on their
brow :

Not Shakespeare's vision, Shelley's flush of wine,
Nor Milton's organ-voice thou hadst ; but
thou

Didst sob thy soul in sorrow through the years,
And swan-like, sang'st thyself to Lethe's
wave ;

And obstinate Fame, that spurned thy passion-
ate tears,

Reluctant laid her wreath upon thy grave.

But while the fern-fringed Luggie flows along,
And Bothlin sings herself into the sea ;

While lovers stray Glenconner's glooms among,
And storied Night holds Merkland's dreams
in fœ,

Fragrant thy memory, and thy star shall be
Luminous among the lesser orbs of song.

On a Chorus-Girl

WITH half a score of singing girls she
swings

Down the bright stage ; sustains a rigid pose,
Toe-dances till her carmine beauty glows,
Then trips into the darkness of the wings :
Changes her dress ; and while some "starlet"
sings,

Into the footlights' glare again she goes,
Creeps on all fours, and dances on her
toes . . .

Her rouged companions do the self-same things.

Twice nightly thus, for thirty bob a week !

No high Ambition swells her kindly heart,
No splendid rôle she craves, no brainy part,
Yet Hope burns where those spangly
sequins shine ;

Hope that to her may come the chance to
speak—

The envied chance to speak the envied line.

En Passant

LIKE ships that in the darkness speak, and
 pass
 Again into the silence of the night,
 We met—and Life for that short space was
 bright,
 And Speech for that brief hour knew no “Alas.”
 And then we parted. Still, in Memory’s glass
 Her beckoning image trysts my questing
 sight ;
 I see those eyes agleam with magic light
 Like dew upon the soft and sunlit grass.

I know not if her prayer at Sorrow’s shrine
 Blends with the prayers of countless wor-
 shippers ;
 I cannot tell if Joy her bosom stirs,
 And life be like a cup of generous wine.
 Only I know I held her hand in mine,
 And looked upon those sea-blue eyes of hers.

The Abbey Ruins

LOW on the earth the cross was laid, and
 o'er
 The marble cross a sculptured dome was
 hung ;
 Within these walls, from golden censers
 swung,
 Rose perfumed prayers to heaven's altar-floor ;
 And many a traveller at the Abbey door
 Aside his worldly burden careless flung,
 And, hearing some high Benediction sung,
 Found that strange peace for which his heart
 was sore.

But now within these green and crumbling walls
 No incense rises at the day's decrease,
 No mitred abbot claims this diocese,
 Nor hooded friar at midnight treads these halls ;
 Yet from yon tower a benediction falls,
 And still these desolate cloisters whisper
 "Peace."

On a Representation of "Othello"

ACT III. SCENE III.

THE intrigue has triumphed ; it is too, too late ;

The proofs are vouched for. Now I see thee stand

Like an august Colossus, dark and grand,
Fronting the onset of disastrous fate :
Swells thy black bosom with its desperate freight,

Lean the ripe fruits of vengeance toward thy hand,

Now must thou pluck ;—dead the fond schemes love planned,
And all that flower-soft love is tyrannous hate.

Now is the chainèd beast in man set free,
Thine now the thirst blood only may assuage ;

In purple of passion—fury of frenzied rage,
O thou deluded Moor, I bow to thee
Who, in this hour of culminant agony,
Gasp'st inarticulate upon the stage.

Smith—Bank Accountant

R.I.P.

POOOR Smith ! He taught me how to write
the "State,"

And post the Ledger ; and with sedulous
care

He led me step by step, and eke would share
My clerkly sorrows at each change of rate ;

His kindly censure when I came in late,
His lucid answer to each "Please explain,"

I seem to hear and read ; and once again
I stand beside him at the office gate.

So farewell, Smith. The Cash is put away,
The Ledger balanced and the "State" sur-
veyed,

And all the wrong endorsements guar-
anteed.

From dusty desk-work is his spirit freed,
And in Head Office he appears to-day
Before The Chief Inspector undismayed.

Christ at "Aladdin"

THE house is crammed, the overture is
done ;

The curtain rises o'er the lowered lights ;
Across the stage swing troops of tinselled
sprites,

And round and round the comic policemen run :

The Widow Twankey dances with her son

The debonair Aladdin, brave in tights ;

Within the magic cave what dazzling sights,
And in the enchanted palace, oh, what fun !

The childish flotsam of the neighbouring streets,
Long breathless wondering, from the topmost
seats

Sends sudden laughter rippling through the
air ;

O marred yet merry little ones, I know,

The Christ Who smiled on children long ago,

Himself hath entered by the gallery stair.

Ad Vesperas

I ENTER by the lowly chapel door,
And leave a while the loud and lighted
street,

And in the twilight of this calm retreat—
Where those around me, kneeling on the floor,
With diligent fingers count their Rosaries o'er,
And unseen choirs the Latin psalms repeat—
I seem to sit the while at Jesus' feet,
And all my flood of guilt and grief outpour.

Soon will the Benediction pomps begin,
And incense rise, and votive tapers shine ;
The Sacred Host be hymned in chaunts divine
That tell how grace has triumphed over sin :
But now, while broods this hallowed gloom
within,
Seemeth the Eternal Presence more benign.

On a Low Comedian

THE index changes ; up his number goes ;
 The lights are lowered and the "rag"
 divides ;

In motley costume from the wings he strides,
 With blue and scarlet face and luminous nose ;
 He hobbles round, strikes an eccentric pose,
 Leans on his stick and croaks a few "asides,"
 Then sings a song about his former brides,
 A jingle of his matrimonial woes.

His "biz." and "cackle" done he gets a
 "round,"

Balloons a bit and exits in a bound,
 The tickled gods chorus his song the
 while. . . .

And from His holy house beyond the skies
 Methinks the Christ looks down with loving
 eyes

Whene'er He sees His toil-worn children
 smile.

Pluscarden Priory

DEEP in the central silence of the hills,
 Where broods eternal peace, her towers
 uprise,
 And open to the gray and northern skies
 Her roofless cloisters stand. The lone wind fills
 The unpeopled aisles ; and now the rain distils
 Where rose of old the atoning sacrifice,
 And in yon organ-loft as daylight dies
 Some wandering bird to-night her vespers trills.

No ghostly prior paceth yonder hall,
 Nor cell-worn monk his evening Rosary saith ;
 Yet 'mid these ruins, eloquent of death,
 A living symbol crowns the deep-leaved wall ;
 Christ on the Cross broods silent over all—
 The eternal emblem of a deathless faith.

On hearing Chopin's "Marche Funèbre"

VLADIMIR DE PACHMANN

THE pulse of Grief beats through these
quivering strains,
And the all-conscious keys are fraught with
drear

And wizard echoes from those shadow-plains
Where mortals journey, and return not here :
Chopin ! What dole was at thy spirit's core,
What sainted sorrow, what enthroned despair,
What cup of woe was emptied of its store
When thou didst thus thy painèd soul lay
bare ?

The marbles sleep. And yet those strains divine
Haunt me, and fill me with a vague unrest ;
Somewhat of sadness lingers in my breast,
Somewhat of mist still dims my tearless eyne :
O God ! This wild and wayward spirit of mine
A little space hath been supremely blest.

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam

THEY call Him the Good Shepherd and
the Lamb,
The Rose, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel ;
And yet, half-vaunting, of His vengeance
tell

On all who traffic in deceit or sham ;
They boast much knowledge of the dread I AM,
And babble of a Book whose pages swell
With record of men's faults since Adam fell—
Nay, He inscribeth every muttered "Damn."

They have not seen the Lord who tell such
things,
They have not touched His garment in the
throng,
The foolish folk who know not what they
say . . .

No book of doom is hid beneath His wings,
And when men stumble in blind paths of
wrong
How often doth He look the other way !

“Resting”

I MET her at the top of Catherine Street,
 A pale-faced girl in her pathetic “best,”
 She told me how dead weary was her quest,
 And how the “Actors’ Mile” was each day’s beat
 From ten to five. She had been “out” since

May,

Her “panto” savings now were well-nigh
 spent

On callous agents and the weekly rent
 Of her third-floor “combined” out Brixton way.

She was a “small-part woman” in the “Smalls,”

In Town she “supered” and would just
 “walk on,”

A rouged and spangled creature gaily
 dressed—

Now “shops” were scarce at theatres and halls,
 And she was “resting,” sore dismayed and
 lone—

The resting that has not the gift of rest.

Beethoven .

FOR other ears he wove his melodies—
 Those melodies of surging hopes and
 fears—

The echo-music from dead Arcadies
 That from her cell the imprisoned soul
 unspheres.

Under his magic touch, the silent keys
 Trembled to life, and melted into tears ;
 And, in a thousand mystic harmonies,
 He sang his wordless songs—for other ears.

Like him whose sightless eyes saw heaven and
 hell,
 Whose visions were for other eyes to see,
 So he who poured his soul in rhapsody
 Heard not his soul's outpourings ; yet did dwell
 In Music's cloudy sanctuary to rain
 Immortal symphonies on mortal men.

On a Gymnastic Contortionist

HE makes his entrance on his hands and
knees,

His pliant backbone like Diana's bow,
And snake-like glistening in the limelight's
glow,

He coils his tinselled limbs by slow degrees ;
Turning a "cartwheel," he assumes with ease.

A froggish shape, and bounces to and fro,
Hand-climbs a ladder, and concludes his show
With sinuous twistings on a high trapeze.

Twice every evening for his scanty "screw"
He coils his limbs and stretches tendon and
threw,

And climbs the ladder rung by difficult rung ;
No proud theatric crown he strives to gain,
Content and happy could he but remain
For ever lithe, if not for ever young.

The Garden of Life

I DREAMED a vision of a garden fair,
 That half in light and half in shadow lay,
 Southward the sunbeams ever seemed to play
 On odorous blossoms massed and marshalled
 there ;
 The northern slope was scentless, bleak and
 bare,
 Veiled in eternal twilight chill and gray,
 "Here Sorrow bides from day to dolorous
 day ;
 The other side," I said, "is Joy's parterre."

And one by one the folk came tripping in,
 Enraptured, taking Joy's delightful path,
 Gleaning in armfuls Spring's rich after-
 math,
 The while they filled the place with merry din :
 But ere my dream rolled from me I descried
 The self-same folk come up the darkling side.

Miserrima

HAEC IN TERRA MISERRIMA COELUM INIIT

A FAIR-HAIRED harlot on a city street—
Her purple sunshade smutched with
sludge and rain,

Her coloured dress all draggled at the train,
And worn the shoes upon her tired feet—

I saw her creep from out the policeman's beat,
And, shunning sight, slink down a choking
lane ;

Starveling she looked, as if the hunger-pain
Had made her tawdry wretchedness complete.

Now she is dead, poor Child ; and now
to-night—

Forgotten pious spleen and cruel jest,
The scornful brow, Propriety's cold
stare—

I see her sleeping in the land of light,
Soft-pillowed on the Magdalene's breast,
And no Reproach nor any pain is there.

Stella Maris

LOW hung the mist athwart the twilight sea,
The waves had passed from rioting to
sleep,
Nor swish nor sob was shoreward borne to me,
Nor drift nor spume disturbed the outer
deep ;
It was so soft a night ; the world seemed veiled
In gray and downy slumber, when from far
Into the amplitude of heaven sailed
The splendour of a solitary star.

I thought upon Our Lady, and I knew
It was her star, her bright and vestal flame :
The enshrouding mist, a guilty thing, withdrew,
As from that orb benignant effluence came ;
Love-lit, I yearned for speech all tender-true,
To sing the peerless honours of her name.

The Property Man

UNBILLED, unnamed, he never gets a
 "hand,"

He never "takes the curtain," though he plays
 The augustest part of all, and nightly sways
 A rod more potent than a wizard's wand ;
 Cities as magic-fair as Samarcand,

He summons forth to front the footlights'
 blaze ;

His Jovelike nod the hurricane obeys,
 And the long thunder leaps at his command.

Custodian of treasure without end,
 Impartial arbiter of woe and weal,
 Bidding the joy-bells chime, the requiem
 toll . . .

He doffs his sceptre when the "tabs" descend,
 And hurries homeward to a midnight meal—
 A mug of porter and a sausage-roll.

On a Street Preacher

BENEATH a spectral lamp I saw him stand
Where a gaunt alley branches off the
street ;

Bareheaded to the bitter wind and sleet,
And with a sodden Bible in his hand,
He howled that Hell's peculiar pains were
planned

For those who hurried by with heedless feet,
While those who hearkened would have Joy
complete

Where glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land.

On walking homeward from a "second house"

I met him with his little girl, and lo—

Unkindly tugging at her shoddy blouse

He roughly pulled and pushed her to and
fro. . . .

Christ fondled little children long ago,

And this man vaunted he had Christ to spouse.

The Wardrobe Mistress

SADDENED by dreams of what she might
have been,

Sick with the thought of what she is to-day,
She droops, a little woman, pinched and gray,
Within the shadow of a painted scene ;
Still lingers on her weary face the sheen
Of make-believe ; the cruel crow's-feet stray
Beneath her faded eyes, and mute dismay
Lurks in her timid and pathetic mien.

Echoes of bygone triumphs wake her breast—
The nights of tinselled bliss, the dizzy whirl,
The sparkling gauds, the limelight and the
band—

Now with a needle in her work-worn hand,
She potters round the wings, all drably drest,
Stitching the trappings of some thoughtless
girl.

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